

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Working Within the Aspiring Center: Professional Status and Mobilities Among Migrant Faculty in Singapore

Journal Item

How to cite:

Ortiga, Yasmin Y.; Chou, Meng-Hsuan; Sondhi, Gunjan and Wang, Jue (2019). Working Within the Aspiring Center: Professional Status and Mobilities Among Migrant Faculty in Singapore. Higher Education Policy, 32(2) pp. 146–166.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2018 International Association of Universities



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1057/s41307-017-0078-0>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Higher Education Policy

Working within the aspiring centre: Professional status and mobilities among migrant faculty in Singapore

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:		
Full Title:	Working within the aspiring centre: Professional status and mobilities among migrant faculty in Singapore	
Article Type:	Original Article	
Funding Information:	National Research Foundation Singapore (SRIE 023)	Jue Wang
Abstract:	<p>This paper investigates the migration of Asian-born academics from traditional centres in the West to Singapore, a rapidly developing education hub in Southeast Asia. We show how such movement is driven by the desire to find a "middle ground," where migrant faculty could be "close enough" to aging parents and family, while working in an institution that is "good enough" to continue research work. This position leads to conflicting notions of social mobility, when defined in terms of professional prestige and status. While interviewees perceived their move to Singapore as a form of upward mobility when compared to colleagues within their home countries, they simultaneously worried about their downward mobility compared to peers who had remained in the West. Such perceptions shape their decision to leave Singapore in the future, reinforcing current university hierarchies, where institutions in the US and Europe continue to dominate notions of academic prestige.</p>	
Corresponding Author:	Yasmin Ortiga National University of Singapore SINGAPORE	
Corresponding Author Secondary Information:		
Corresponding Author's Institution:	National University of Singapore	
Corresponding Author's Secondary Institution:		
First Author:	Yasmin Ortiga	
First Author Secondary Information:		
Order of Authors:	Yasmin Ortiga	
	Meng-Hsuan Chou	
	Gunjan Sondhi	
	Jue Wang	
Order of Authors Secondary Information:		
Author Comments:		

Working within the aspiring centre: Professional status and mobilities among migrant faculty in Singapore

Yasmin Y. Ortega (*corresponding author*)

College of Alice and Peter Tan, National University of Singapore

Address: 8 College Avenue East, #B1-50, Singapore 138615

Email: yasmin.ortiga@gmail.com

Meng-Hsuan Chou,

Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, Nanyang Technological University

Address: School of Humanities and Social Sciences, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332

Email: Hsuan@ntu.edu.sg

Gunjan Sondhi

Faculty of the Arts and Social Sciences, The Open University

Email: gunjan.sondhi@open.ac.edu

Jue Wang

Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, Nanyang Technological University

Address: School of Humanities and Social Sciences, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332

Email: WangJue@ntu.edu.sg

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation, Singapore under Grant SRIE 023.

[Click here to view linked References](#)

The growth of research universities in places like Asia and the Middle East has prompted the aggressive recruitment of qualified faculty, sparking an increased interest in the international movement of researchers, scientists, and scholars (Altbach and Balan, 2007; Cerna, 2016; Chou, Kamola, and Tamson 2016). In the context of such heightened competition for academic “talent,” research studies have sought to understand individuals’ migration decisions and the probability of retention within their host institutions (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; Robertson, 2006; Tremblay, 2005). Recent years have seen a large number of studies on international students, highlighting how these future professionals negotiate their career aspirations with family ties, amidst external factors beyond their control, such as immigration policies (welcoming or otherwise), experiences of discrimination, and employer requirements (Alberts and Hazen, 2005; Geddie, 2013; King and Raghuram 2013). However, fewer studies provide in-depth analysis of how migrant faculty who take on tenure-track positions encounter similar issues within their host societies and institutions. In contrast to the study of foreign students, research on migrant faculty generally portray their movement as primarily career driven, attracted to places that offer the best compensation for their knowledge and skills, as well as better sponsorship for research funding and expenditures (Guth and Gill, 2008; Kou et al., 2015; Rostan and Hohle, 2014). This perspective has largely informed talent recruitment policies in many nations seeking to enhance the status and prestige of local universities, with many state-run institutions offering economic and research incentives to faculty from prestigious institutions in the West.

This paper identifies with a growing number of scholars who call for a more nuanced understanding of academic mobility within today’s increasingly stratified higher education system (see Ackers, 2008; Carozza and Menucci, 2014). In particular, we emphasize the need to look at how academics make meaning of their mobility and how they plan their migration trajectories (Saint-Blancat, 2017). We focus specifically on the experiences of

Asian-born faculty who migrated to take on tenure-track positions in Singapore after studying or working in prestigious institutions in the Europe and the US. While researchers have investigated the movement of academics between developing countries and traditional centres of knowledge production in the West, fewer scholars have looked at migration flows to “aspiring centres” (Altbach 2006, 124) such as Singapore, where government agencies invest heavily in the aggressive recruitment of foreign faculty. This paper also discusses how migrant faculty retention and future migration decisions are shaped by pressures that extend beyond national borders: cross-border ties to aging parents and community in their “home” countries, as well as a need to remain visible within a global academic community largely centered in the West. For most of the migrant faculty in our study, this situation brings about conflicting notions of social mobility, when defined in terms of professional prestige and status. On the one hand, many of our interviewees viewed their movement to Singapore as a form of upward mobility, an opportunity to stay ‘close’ to family but beyond the underfunded and ‘unproductive’ universities within their home countries. On the other hand, the migrant faculty we interviewed also saw themselves as downwardly mobile compared to peers who had remained in the West. These contradicting ideas influence their future mobility decisions, thereby reflecting and reinforcing current inequalities in global higher education.

Mobility and the Migrant Scholar

Research studies have generally depicted migrant faculty as professionals who lead extremely mobile lives, moving to embark on further training, take on academic positions, or collaborate with overseas colleagues. While some studies have focused on increasing cross-border mobility within specific scientific fields (see Ackers, 2005; Paul and Long, 2016), others have noted growing international mobility ‘throughout the whole system’ (Fontes, Videira, and Calapez, 2013, 440), with academics and researchers beyond fields in Science,

1 Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) also engaged in cross-border movement and
2 collaboration (see Rostan and Ceravolo, 2015).
3

4 Existing studies have largely depicted academic mobility as an accumulation of
5 human and social capital (Bozeman et al., 2001; Kapur, 2005), where scholars are likely to
6 move towards places where opportunities emerge. These ‘poles of gravity’ or ‘centres’ are
7 venues that have a concentration of institutions accorded a high level of prestige, which then
8 provide affiliated scholars with a degree of credibility and authority in their fields (Mahroum,
9 2000). Philip Altbach (2006, 124) defines these academic centres as institutions with the
10 funding, facilities, and qualified staff to pursue high quality research and teaching. In
11 contrast, higher education institutions at the ‘periphery’ are often found in nations whose
12 research and teaching programs would benefit greatly from the ‘expertise’ of citizens who
13 have studied or worked in these centers for knowledge production. In recent years,
14 international university rankings have emerged as a key indicator of an institution’s status
15 and prestige, with heavy emphasis placed on research and publications. A number of scholars
16 have critiqued such rankings for its bias towards Western standards for academic work, and
17 the reliance on indicators that favor already-established institutions based in the US and UK
18 (Jons and Hoyler, 2013; Marginson and van der Wende, 2007; Stack, 2013).
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41 Despite such critiques, universities within fast developing economies in Asia and the
42 Middle East continue to look towards the West in the hope of transforming their own
43 universities into centres for teaching and research. These aspiring centres have also become
44 important players in contemporary academic mobility, aggressively recruiting faculty and
45 staff from some of the most prestigious universities in the world (Ng, 2013; Knight, 2011).
46 While researchers have recognized the rapid growth of universities within these new
47 education hubs, few studies provide an in depth understanding of foreign faculty’s
48 experiences within these places, with most policymakers attributing such migration flows to
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 economic incentives and career opportunities (see for exception Kim, 2016; Lee and Kim,
2 2010; Romanowski and Nasser, 2015). Existing studies have also focused mainly on
3
4 challenges within migrant faculty's host societies and institutions. For example, Kim's (2016)
5
6 study discusses how Western academics within a Korean university express intentions to
7
8 leave due to a perceived lack of authority and power within the institution's bureaucracy. In
9
10 two universities in Qatar, Romanowski and Nasser (2015) cite foreign faculty's struggles
11
12 with their inability to critique social issues – an obstacle that then affects their identity as
13
14 academics and scholars (cf. Noori, 2016).
15
16
17
18

19 This paper contributes to this literature by discussing how transnational ties beyond
20
21 national borders shape academic migration towards aspiring centres like Singapore, and how
22
23 migrant faculty later perceive their status in the context of global higher education
24
25 hierarchies. In the following section, we show how migrant faculty in Singapore make sense
26
27 of their current positions, not only in terms of their position within a 'global' professional
28
29 community, but also in terms of scholars and colleagues who remain in their countries of
30
31 origin.
32
33
34
35

36 *Context: Singapore as the Aspiring Centre*

37
38 International policymakers and researchers have often referred to Singapore as a well-known
39
40 example of an emerging education hub, given the rapid development of its universities, from
41
42 institutions run mostly as a civil service to world class higher education institutions (Currie,
43
44 Vidovich, and Yang, 2008). State-led projects established research centers and institutes
45
46 within the country, where researchers kept pace with the demands of knowledge centers and
47
48 industries across the world. Partnerships with prestigious universities from the West also
49
50 provided an important source of symbolic capital, bolstering Singapore's reputation as a
51
52 knowledge and innovation hub (Lee, 2014; Sidhu, Ho, and Yeoh 2011). Currently, Singapore
53
54 institutions such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 University (NTU) continue to climb up the university rankings, now placed among the top 20
2 institutions in the world (QS University Rankings 2016)
3

4
5 Alongside these massive investments in university structures and partnerships, the rise
6
7 of Singapore universities also relied heavily on recruiting faculty and researchers from well-
8
9 known higher education institutions (Gopinathan and Lee, 2011; Yeoh and Lai, 2008). Such
10
11 recruitment strategies reflected the general logic of offering financial and social capital as a
12
13 way to attract foreign faculty. University administration advertised faculty positions in
14
15 established international academic journals, offering generous compensation packages and
16
17 research resources that rival those offered by Western countries (Paul and Long, 2016).
18
19 Singapore then serves as an important case in understanding the effectiveness and limitations
20
21 of such strategies in retaining migrant faculty and what other factors shape individuals'
22
23 experiences within the country's universities.
24
25
26
27
28

29 **Methods**

30
31 This paper is based on qualitative interviews with 47 migrant faculty members (17 tenured
32
33 and 30 tenure-track) who were born and grew up in countries geographically close to
34
35 Singapore (including Australia), but spent considerable time in Europe or North America
36
37 either working in academic positions or pursuing a doctorate and/or postdoc.¹ This sampling
38
39 decision reflects the shift in the demographics of migrant scholars. While earlier studies have
40
41 tended to portray migrant faculty as a group of Western expatriates (see Cohen 1977;
42
43 Hindman 2009), recent years have shown a growing proportion of migrant faculty and
44
45 researchers who were born outside the West and pursued postgraduate study in North
46
47 America or Western Europe (see Lawrence et al 2014; NCES 2006). This paper seeks to
48
49
50
51
52
53
54

55 ¹ This paper is part of an ongoing project on the migration decisions and experiences of
56 foreign scientists and scholars in Singapore. The research team interviewed a total of 80
57 foreign academics working in Singapore. Aside from the interviews included in this study,
58 research participants originate from countries such as the US, UK, France, Germany, and
59 Spain.
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 contribute to a deeper understanding of the migration decisions driving the mobility of this
2 growing group of migrant faculty. We define “migrant faculty” as academics not born in
3 Singapore who moved to the country to take on tenure track positions within its universities.²
4
5 There are no existing statistics as to the number of migrant faculty within Singpaore
6
7 universities, however Paul and Long (2016) estimate that close to 60% of tenure-track faculty
8
9 members working in the country are foreigners.
10
11
12
13

14 We interviewed a total of 20 women and 27 men, all employed at three of Singapore’s
15 major universities. The research team recruited interviewees by sending invitation emails to
16
17 faculty members from four major fields: STEM, Social Sciences, Humanities, and the
18
19 Professional Schools. We then asked interviewees to connect us to other colleagues who
20
21 might be interested in participating in the project (“snowball” sampling). To supplement this
22
23 recruitment method, team members also promoted the project at university workshops and
24
25 events, distributing fliers with project details to interested faculty members. Table 1 and 2
26
27 show the breakdown of the sample by country of origin and discipline (STEM, Social
28
29 Science, Humanities, and Professional Schools).
30
31
32
33
34
35

36 [Table 1 and Table 2 near here]
37
38

39 Interview questions centered on participants’ decision to come (or come back) to
40
41 Singapore. We asked about how they negotiated this migration decision with personal factors
42
43 such as family and relationships, as well as career opportunities and challenges. While the
44
45 time spent overseas varied widely, participants loosely referred to their countries of origin as
46
47 “home,” mainly defined as a place where they grew up, and, more importantly, where parents
48
49 and siblings remain. As such, we refer to the “home country” in this way as well, while
50
51
52
53
54
55

56 ² Rostan and colleagues (2014: 282) differentiate migrant faculty from “circulating” faculty
57 or academics who “work where they were born but have experienced border crossing either
58 for study or professional purposes.”
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 recognizing that there is a growing literature that problematizes how this term is defined.³ We
2 also asked participants whether they maintained international collaborations and how being in
3 Singapore shaped their current research networks and agendas.
4
5
6
7

8 Like other qualitative studies, this paper is limited in that we base our analysis on how
9 interviewees make meaning of their migration decisions, their experiences in Singapore, and
10 their professional status. We cannot make claims about all foreign academics in Singapore or
11 all forms of mobility in other aspiring centres. We also acknowledge that there are many
12 differences among nationalities, ethnicities, and academic disciplines. This paper focuses
13 mainly on common themes across groups and our small sample does not allow us to make
14 broad comparisons between different groups. However, we emphasize that our findings
15 reflect the way foreign academics think about their mobility trajectories and the possibility of
16 their future movement. Such perceptions have important resonance for policies on retaining
17 talent – an aspect of the war for talent, which has received less attention in the current
18 literature.
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33

34 35 36 **Migrating to the ‘Middle Ground’: Professional and Family Lives**

37 Migrant faculty in our study described their initial decision to leave home as a need to
38 accumulate both human and social capital. Many of them had pursued academic training in
39 well-known universities in the West, hoping to work with a famous professor or join an
40 established program in their fields. Yet, in deciding where to move after graduation, ties to
41 family and home communities became a more salient factor (see Lee and Kim 2010). On one
42 hand, all our interviewees for this study expressed a desire to obtain jobs in higher education
43 institutions with reputable programs, good research support, and reasonable compensation.
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55

56 ³ Mallet (2004) provides a critical review of the notion of “home.” Migration scholars have
57 also studied issues of integration, belonging, and identity, using a more critical analysis of
58 what the “home country” means to different immigrant groups (see Ahmed 1999; Espiritu
59 2003; Ralph 2009)
60
61
62
63
64
65

Poor job prospects in the US and Europe prompted them to look for opportunities beyond the West, and Singapore was one of the few places that offered highly ranked universities and a vibrant research environment. They also appreciated Singapore's openness to foreign academics – given the difficulty of sometimes obtaining work visas in places like the UK.

However, interviewees were also attracted to the idea of being closer to family members they had left behind. In line with Paul and Long's (2016) study, many of our interviewees were born in nations relatively near Singapore (when compared with the US and UK). While China and India were major source countries, a good number came from neighboring nations (Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia), as well as Australia (see Table 1). Many of our interviewees did not want to relive their graduate school years in North America and Europe, where the long distance, expensive airline tickets and visa restrictions prevented them from seeing their families. One Assistant Professor from China shared that he did not visit his parents for four years because of a tight laboratory schedule and a limited travel budget. His parents could not visit him as well, being unable to obtain a US visa from China.

Yet, in searching for work beyond the West, our interviewees did not see their home countries as ideal venues for their career development, given reasons such as limited support for research and relatively lower wages for academics. As such, they looked for destinations that would be both 'close enough' to home and 'good enough' for their academic careers. One Associate Professor from India shared that she had spent many years in the US before considering a move to Singapore. While her main motivation was to be closer to her parents, mainly her father who had just suffered from a stroke, Singapore's 'visibility' in her field made the country an 'appropriate place' for her to continue the high caliber scientific work that has defined her career. Similarly, an Assistant Professor who was born in Thailand, recounted how she actually had an offer from a teaching college in the US, yet saw her

1 tenure-track position in Singapore as a better ‘career move.’ She had weighed this decision
2 with a strong pull to be closer to her family, more particularly, her aging parents back home.
3

4 My mom is getting older, I lost my dad last year. You know, so it has made me think
5 about how I want to spend my time. *Being here satisfies me in terms of my*
6 *professional life and it is also helpful not to be so far away from my mom* [emphasis
7 added]. You know, it’s only a two-hour flight [to go back home] and there are so
8 many flights. I can always fly back on the weekends.
9

10 While many migrants maintain transnational connections between their current locations and
11 home communities that are often far apart, this Assistant Professor’s statement shows how
12 geographic distance was a big factor in how most interviewees wanted to relate to their
13 families back home. The migrant scholars in this study wanted to be able to fly home often to
14 spend more time with family, support parents, and visit siblings. Such tasks would not be
15 possible if one were to fly from North America or Europe. As noted by one Associate
16 Professor from India,
17

18 My parents are getting old. It will only become worse, it’s not going to get better...if
19 they break their bone, I have to be there and see what’s happening, meet with
20 doctors, come back. So I have to be somewhere which is practical. I’m the only
21 child! My wife’s mother had a heart attack while we were in the US and it was very
22 difficult to manage from a distance.
23

24 In many ways, coming to Singapore was a decision that balanced interviewees’ needs in
25 terms of their professional careers and personal family lives. Singapore served as a *middle*
26 *ground* where migrant faculty could be close to their home countries and continue to
27 contribute to their academic fields. In the following sections, we discuss how being in this
28 position led to contradicting notions of professional status and mobility.
29

Upward mobility: Close but not ‘too close’

As part of an aspiring centre like Singapore, migrant faculty in this study felt a sense of being upwardly mobile, at least when compared to scholars who returned to their home countries or those who never left. While interviewees respected former professors and classmates, they felt that academia within their home countries were still ‘behind’ in terms of faculty support and research productivity, and as such, lacked international prestige in the global academic community. One Assistant Professor explained,

The unfortunate reality is that I know a lot of people, even among my friends, who are trained in North America, then they go back to Japan and then you basically don’t hear from them. I mean, yes, they got a job, they’re doing okay, but, there’s a lot of admin work, there’s a lot of teaching work, and a lot of teaching that is not [in their field]. And therefore, they can’t actively produce after that, right? So for personal reasons, in terms of family, I would really enjoy being in Japan. But, with very few exceptions, positions in Japan are really not good, well at least in my field.

In this interviewee’s perspective, returning to Japan meant sacrificing research work for administrative and teaching duties, something that he felt would be ‘not good’ for his own professional development. Other interviewees echoed the same sentiment, emphasizing how Singapore offered a university system that was ‘like the US,’ wherein faculty would be given the freedom to focus on research.

The foreign scholars in our study also voiced concerns about how academia in their home countries remained saddled with ‘traditional politics’ and ‘biases’ that made it harder for faculty to do their work. One Associate Professor explained that she decided against returning to China because she felt that career opportunities in local universities largely depended on ‘who you know,’ and academics spent a lot of time finding ways to connect to influential people. While such politics are likely to exist in places like Singapore and

elsewhere, she believed that such systems were less hierarchical and more meritocratic.

Describing herself as someone who is terrible at politicking, this interviewee felt that Singapore was a better place to further her career based on her research, rather than her networks,

We spent many years outside China where you do things very simple. Sometimes, you don't know how to talk to people. For us, you just present the facts, you don't think so much about, 'What happens if I say this?' I heard some stories from friends who have gone back...you have to do lots of socials, networking. The structure there is quite complex. I still prefer Singapore. The research environment is healthier.

For a Professor originally from Malaysia, returning home would not only mean contending with university politics, but wider social disparities. As an ethnic Chinese, state policies favoring ethnic Malays would have made it difficult for him to receive the same opportunities in Malaysia as he did in Singapore, 'I don't think they would have made me Head of Department!' He also noted that there are very few international scholars in Malaysian universities, and, as a result, felt that the work of scholars based within these institutions is sometimes 'insular.' In this sense, he felt that he had achieved much more in his career than others who had returned home.

In many ways, comparisons between Singapore and the West also included the standards that universities set and expected of their faculty. While many migrant academics were critical about Singapore's rising expectations in terms of research output, they also felt that emphasis on peer-reviewed journals and international publications was an important element of academia that was often lacking in their home countries. One Assistant Professor from Korea shared that,

1 Korean academics can just survive with just one or two publications in American
2 journals [for their entire career]. Then they can just produce for Korean journals. I
3
4 mean there are good studies, fairly interesting ones, but still, the standard is not
5
6 quite...and also, it does not take too much time [to publish], unlike the American
7
8 journals...So in a sense, if I go back to Korea, it means that it's okay to stay
9
10 completely away from mainstream academia.
11
12
13
14

15 This interviewee's statement reveals how foreign scholars value publications as a means of
16
17 remaining within a 'mainstream' academic community. Returning to their home countries
18
19 meant possibly losing institutional and personal motivations, as well as the resources, to keep
20
21 producing work at 'international' standards. Reflecting existing hierarchies among higher
22
23 education institutions, many of our interviewees ranked Singapore as a place that their home
24
25 countries are still trying to 'catch up' with. As such, they saw themselves in an upwardly
26
27 mobile position in terms of their career.
28
29
30
31

32 **Downward Mobility: Working away from the Centre**

33

34 Migrant faculty in our study did not only work to maintain ties with their families back home,
35
36 but an international academic community, comprising fellow researchers and scholars from
37
38 either the same disciplinary background or substantive research area. Many of these scholars
39
40 obtained their doctorates from prestigious Western universities, where they had the privilege
41
42 of meeting well-known professors at formal and social events organized by their departments.
43
44 In many ways, being at the center of their academic communities allowed interviewees to
45
46 actively participate in the latest trends within their fields, and, as our interviewees noted,
47
48 coming to Singapore meant being 'isolated' from these scholarly networks and activities. As
49
50 such, they worried about maintaining their 'visibility' among academics in the West, and
51
52 often felt a sense of *downward mobility* as compared to peers who had chosen to remain
53
54 within the US or UK.
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

Interviewees' concerns about academic status went beyond research publications. While they had published extensively in their own fields, they worried about accessing informal networks and professional community events that allowed them to promote their work, gather new ideas, and make themselves known to other scholars in their fields. The specific ways these networks benefited scholars varied in terms of discipline. Interviewees from STEM fields talked about the importance of knowing what other researchers were working on before these findings were published in journals. As noted by one Associate Professor, relying on publications meant reading about research projects 'that have already been going on for years' – and such information would be 'useless' for scholars seeking to develop new innovations or release original results. On the other hand, social scientists and humanists stressed the importance of testing their arguments with peers, even before sending their work out to academic journals. While these scholars faced a different kind of pressure in justifying the 'novelty' of their research findings, they also saw conferences and seminars as an important way to get the feedback from the would-be reviewers of their work.

Despite these differences, interviewees' narratives showed a common emphasis on the pressure to make their presence felt in their respective academic communities – to not only obtain feedback on academic work, but to also build one's reputation and authority as a scholar. One Assistant Professor from Japan described this process,

You have to sort of do the work to a certain extent of getting your work out there and making it known...And a lot of that happens in person. And also you want to be the person who is known to be friendly, and you know, known to be knowledgeable in certain areas. And later, someone might say, 'Hey we want to have a conference and we should invite this person, or we need a reviewer for this article' and you want them to think of you...That's the kind of currency you buy by showing up [at a conference].

1 The need to obtain such ‘currency’ from academic conferences and gatherings was especially
2 pertinent for untenured professors. Interviewees working towards tenure were well aware that
3 their future academic dossiers would be later sent to well-known scholars, mostly based in
4 the US and Europe. Securing a favorable evaluation then meant ensuring that future
5 reviewers would ‘know’ their work, or at least put a face to a name. As stated by an Assistant
6 Professor from the Philippines,
7

8 So people say ‘Oh yeah, you have to go [to the major conference] because you don’t
9 know who your letter writers will be.’ You need to get your work out there because
10 one of the tenure requirements would be how well do people receive your research.
11 And when asked if they have read [my] work and they don’t even know me, it’s like,
12 ‘Oh no.’ So I think it’s helpful to be in the premier conference in our area. It’s
13 something that you *have* to do if you want to continue being a tenure track faculty.
14

15 Singapore universities provide large funds for conference travel and attendance, yet the
16 reality of geographic distance and teaching and administrative duties made it difficult for
17 scholars to attend all the important events in their field. While some interviewees worked
18 through physical exhaustion just to travel to North America three or four times a year, the
19 majority of our interviewees only attended conferences twice a year. One Associate Professor
20 from India explained:
21

22 What is really problematic is the distance between here and the US, or even Europe.
23 Like, going to the US means that you’re going to miss one week of classes. That’s it.
24 You can’t make a shorter trip. So that always gives you a pause, how many can you
25 do in one semester? Even then, your institution might not want you to do three
26 conferences. Missing three weeks of classes in the middle of the semester is
27

1 definitely a big no-no. It's not like you're hopping to the next city for a seminar, or
2 giving a talk.
3

4 The issues that this interviewee described are especially magnified for foreign scholars with
5 families. For example, one Associate Professor from China was forced to forego international
6 travel for several years at the time she gave birth to her second child. While this decision was
7 not detrimental to her status in her school (she was already tenured at this time), she felt it
8 severely affected her 'presence' among computer scientists in her field:
9

10
11
12 Some friends told me, 'I haven't seen you for years! I thought you moved to another
13 research direction.' That's because they go to major conferences and did not see
14 me...I didn't stop publication, it's just that they could not see me.
15

16
17 Interviewees were well aware that the value placed on American or European conferences
18 were greater and many hoped that places like Singapore would contribute to shifting more
19 attention towards Asia along these same terms. Yet, they also admitted that there was little
20 one could change about the current situation. While local academic associations worked
21 actively to organize events within Singapore and Southeast Asia, the smaller academic
22 community within the region was not enough to generate the kind of intellectual discussions
23 common in North America and Europe. One Associate Professor wryly noted that it is not
24 always easy to convince 'famous' professors to give keynote speeches for conferences in
25 Singapore, not because of a lack of interest but a lack of time. Just as Singapore-based
26 scholars struggle to attend conferences in the West, academics in North America and Europe
27 could not always make time for the long journey to Singapore.
28

29 For a number of interviewees, the feeling of downward mobility was also linked to
30 being affiliated with an institution that few scholars were aware of within their particular
31 disciplines. While Singapore universities are well-placed in world rankings, not all schools
32

1 and departments enjoyed the same prestige within specific disciplines. Some foreign scholars
2 were confident in the name Singapore had built within their fields, yet others felt frustrated at
3 the extra work needed to “introduce” their peers to Singapore universities. Interviewees
4 admitted that such disadvantages were not limited to Singapore-based scholars alone, with
5 many smaller institutions in the West seeking the same recognition within academia.
6
7 However, given the large number of publications generated each year, interviewees felt that
8 they had to put in the extra effort to get others to read their work. One Assistant Professor
9 from Australia shared that he actively attended as many conferences in his field in order to
10 promote his newly published book. While released by a prestigious university press based in
11 the US, he felt he still needed “extra exposure” in order for other academics to review the
12 book or recognize its contribution to the field.
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26

27 When my book came out, I went to a lot of conferences that year because I felt like
28 you had to say “This is my work. This is what I am working on.” Just put your face
29 in front of people and then they might look at the book, right? Because if they never
30 heard of you, they’re never going to find your book. The [reputable press] helps but
31 (pause) there are a lot of books out there (laughs).
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41 Given the work of maintaining a visibility in ‘mainstream’ academia, a number of
42 interviewees utilized their own transnational links to family back home, relying on parents
43 and siblings to help with household matters such as childcare. One Assistant Professor with
44 three children shared that he once had to fly his mother from the Philippines to Singapore, to
45 help take care of the household while he was away for a conference.
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53

54 I do go to conferences but not a lot, but I should be. I don’t know, I’m really not into
55 travelling (laughs). Like just going to Germany for a research project... I have three
56 kids so I had to fly my mom here from the Philippines, just so I could go. Just ten
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 days but it was a logistical nightmare because all three go to school, and at different
2 times of the day. I don't want to go through that every time I go to a conference.
3
4

5 Other interviewees shared similar strategies, flying in parents and siblings to help care for
6 their children while they were away from the country. These struggles added to interviewees'
7 concern about furthering their academic careers, while feeling detached from their academic
8 communities.
9
10

11 **Conclusion**

12 This paper investigated the movement of academics from traditional centres in the West
13 towards Singapore, a rising education hub whose universities have gained prominence in the
14 international higher education market. We showed how such movement is largely driven by
15 the desire to find an ideal middle ground, where migrant faculty could be close enough to
16 aging parents and family, while working in universities that allow them to remain visible in a
17 global community of scholars. On one hand, such migration flows have the potential to
18 greatly benefit aspiring centres like Singapore, where the success of local universities depend
19 on building a pool of full-time faculty with the qualifications and capacity for research
20 (Altbach 2009; Knight 2011). Given that a growing number of doctoral students in North
21 America and Europe originate from Asia, places like Singapore and Hong Kong stand to
22 benefit from migrant academics seeking opportunities to move closer to home without
23 sacrificing their professional careers. Such trends can have important implications for the
24 global competition for talent, where governments have allotted significant resources to recruit
25 highly skilled migrants like academics. The attractiveness of Singapore to Asian-born faculty
26 signal the possible creation of new spaces for knowledge production, as more migrant
27 academics search for opportunities in places beyond traditional centres in the West.
28
29

30 However, this paper also showed that while migrant faculty were able to become
31 productive researchers within Singapore universities, their professional satisfaction and likely
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

1 retention also depended on how they define their own status and mobility within their
2 respective academic communities. Migrant academics trained in Western institutions
3
4 continue to regard these places as the centres of their respective disciplines, and global
5
6 standards for university rankings and prestige favor networks and publications based in
7
8 established institutions in the US and Europe. As such, interviewees in our study expressed
9
10 dissatisfaction with their status in the global academic community, despite their research
11
12 productivity as Singapore-based academics. Our findings coincided with previous studies on
13
14 foreign scientists in Singapore, where their interviewees worried about whether Singapore
15
16 offered the cultural and symbolic capital that would allow them to return to ‘established
17
18 scientific centres’ in Europe and the US (Paul and Long 2016; Sidhu, Yeoh and Chang 2015).
19
20 In many ways, this sense of downward mobility increases the likelihood of migrant faculty
21
22 eventually leaving from Singapore, particularly when provided with competing opportunities
23
24 in American or European universities. The loss of faculty is a big cost to any university,
25
26 disrupting teaching programs and leaving research agendas unfinished (Lawrence et al,
27
28 2014). Yet, such costs can be particularly salient in universities that rely heavily on recruiting
29
30 faculty from overseas, as is the case in many emerging institutions in Asia and the Middle
31
32 East.
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40

41 In a sense, this paper showed how Singapore’s emergence as an attractive destination
42
43 for migrant faculty does not necessarily disrupt current hierarchies in the global higher
44
45 education system. While migrant faculty in Singapore actively published in their respective
46
47 fields, they still look towards the West in defining the leaders and direction of their academic
48
49 disciplines. These limitations demonstrate how the powerful status of highly ranked Western
50
51 institutions creates challenges for aspiring centres of higher education such as Singapore,
52
53 emphasizing the need for more creative policies for talent recruitment and retention.
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
61
62
63
64
65

References

- 1 Ackers, L. 2005. "Moving People and Knowledge: Scientific Mobility in the European
2 Union." *International Migration*, 43(5): 99-132.
- 3 Ahmed, S. 1999. "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement."
4 *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(3): 329-347.
- 5
6 Alberts, H. C. and H. D. Hazen. 2005. "There Are Always Two Voices...": International
7 Students' Intentions To Stay In The United States Or Return To Their Home
8 Countries. *International Migration*, 43(3): 132-153.
- 9
10 Altbach, P. 2006. Globalization and the University: Realities In An Unequal World. In J.
11 Forest and P. Altbach (Eds.) *International handbook of higher education* (pp.121-
12 139). The Netherlands: Springer.
- 13 Altbach, P. 2009. Peripheries and Centers: Research Universities In Developing Countries.
14 *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10: 15-27.
- 15 Altbach, P. and J. Balan. 2007. *World class Worldwide: Transforming Research Universities*
16 *in Asia and Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 17 Bozeman, B., J. Dietz, J., and M. Gaughan. 2001. Scientific and Technical Human Capital:
18 An Alternative Model For Research Evaluation, *International Journal of Technology*
19 *Management*, 22 (7/8), 716-740.
- 20 Carrozza, C. and S. Minucci. (2014). Keep on Movin'? Research Mobility's Meanings for
21 Italian Early-Stage Researchers. *Higher Education Policy*, 27(4), 489-508.
22 <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2014.23>
- 23 Cerna, L. 2016. *Immigration Policies And The Global Competition For Talent*. Basingstoke:
24 Palgrave Macmillan.
- 25 Chou, M-H., I. Kamola, and P. Tamson. 2016. *The Transnational Politics Of Higher*
26 *Education: Contesting The Global / Transforming The Local*. Routledge: Abingdon.
- 27 Cohen, E. 1977. Expatriate Communities, *Current Sociology*, 24(3): 5-90.
- 28 Colic-Peisker, V. 2010. Free Floating In The Cosmopolis? Exploring The Identity-Belonging
29 Of Transnational Knowledge Workers, *Global Networks*, 10(4): 467-89.
- 30 Currie, J., L. Vidovich, and R. Yang. 2008. "Countability Not Answerability?"
31 Accountability in Hong Kong and Singapore Universities, *Asia Pacific Journal of*
32 *Education*, 28(1): 67-85.
- 33 Espiritu, Y L. 2003. *Home bound: Filipino American lives across cultures, communities, and*
34 *countries*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- 35 Fontes, M., P. Videira, and T. Calapez. 2013. The Impact Of Long-Term Scientific Mobility
36 On The Creation Of Persistent Knowledge Networks. *Mobilities*, 8(3), 440-465.
- 37 Geddie, K. 2013. The Transnational Ties That Bind: Relationship Considerations For
38 Graduating International Science and Engineering Research Students, *Population,*
39 *Space and Place*, 19,196-208.
- 40 Gopinathan, S. and M. H. Lee. 2011. Challenging and Co-Opting Globalisation: Singapore's
41 Strategies In Higher Education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*
42 33(3): 287-299.
- 43 Guth, J. and B. Gill. 2008. Motivations in East-West Doctoral Mobility: Revisiting the
44 Question of Brain Drain. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34(5): 825-841.
- 45 Hindman, H. 2009. Cosmopolitan Codifications: Elites, Expatriates, and Difference in
46 Kathmandu, Nepal. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 16 (3), 249-270.
- 47 Jons, H. and M. Hoyler, M. 2013. Global Geographies of Higher Education: The Perspective
48 of World University Rankings. *Geoforum* 46:43-59.
- 49 Kapur, D. 2005. *Give Us Your Best And Your Brightest: The Global Hunt For Talent And Its*
50 *Impact On The Developing World*. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.

- Kim, S. K. 2016. "Western Faculty 'Flight Risk' At A Korean University And The Complexities Of Internationalisation In Asian Higher Education." *Comparative Education* 52(1),78-90.
- Kou, A., L. van Wissen, J. van Dijk, and A. Bailey. 2015. A Life Course Approach To High-Skilled Migration: Lived Experiences of Indians in the Netherlands. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41(10): 1644-1663.
- King, R. and P. Raghuram, P. 2013. International Student Migration: Mapping The Field And New Research Agendas. *Population, Space and Place* 19:127-137.
- Knight, J. 2011. Education Hubs: A Fad, A Brand, An Innovation? *Journal of Studies in International Education* 15(3): 221-240.
- Lawrence, J. H., S. Celis, H. S. Kim, S. K. Lipson, and X. Tong. 2014. To Stay Or Not To Stay: Retention Of Asian International Faculty in STEM fields. *Higher Education* 67, 511-531.
- Lee, J. T. 2014. Education Hubs And Talent Development: Policymaking And Implementation Challenges. *Higher Education* 68: 807-823.
- Lee, J. J., and D. Kim. 2010. Brain gain or Brain Circulation? US Doctoral Recipients Returning to South Korea. *Higher Education* 59: 627-643.
- Mahroum, S. 2000. Scientists and Global Spaces. *Technology in Society* 22: 513-523.
- Mallett, S. 2004. Understanding Home: A Critical Review Of The Literature. *The Sociological Review*, 52 (1): 62-89.
- Marginson, S. and M. van der Wende. 2007. To Rank or To Be Ranked: The Impact Of Global Rankings In Higher Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3-4), 306-29.
- Mosneaga, A. and L. Winther. 2013. Emerging Talents? International Students Before And After Their Career Start in Denmark, *Population, Space and Place* 19, 181-195.
- National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2006, May). 2004 National study of postsecondary faculty (NSOPF:04) Retrieved July 17, 2011, from NCES website <http://nces.ed.gov>.
- Ng, P. T. 2013. The Global War For Talent: Responses And Challenges In The Singapore Higher Education System. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 35(3), 280-292.
- Paul, A. M. and V. Long. 2016. Human-capital Strategies To Build World-Class Research Universities In Asia: Impact On Global Flows. In M-H. Chou, I. Kamola and T. Pietsch (Eds.) *The transnational politics of higher education: Contesting the global / transforming the local* (pp.130-155), Abingdon: Routledge.
- QS World University Ranking. 2016. World University Rankings 2016/17. <http://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2015>
- Ralph, D. 2009. Home is Where The Heart Is? Understandings Of "Home" Among Irish-Born Return Migrants from the United States. *Irish Studies Review* 17 (2),183-200.
- Robertson, S. L. 2006. Brain drain, Brain Gain And Brain Circulation. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(1): 1-5.
- Romanowski, M. and R. Nasser. 2015. Identity issues: expatriate professors teaching and researching in Qatar. *Higher Education* 69: 653-671.
- Rostan, M. and E. A. Hohle. 2014. The International Mobility of Faculty. In F. Huang, M. Finkelstein & M. Rostan (Eds.), *The internationalization of the academy: Changes, realities and prospects* (pp. 79-105). Heidelberg: Springer.
- Rostan, M. and F. A. Ceravolo. 2015. The Internationalisation Of The Academy: Convergence And Divergence Across Disciplines. *European Review* 23, S38-S54.
- Rostan, M., F. Huang and M. Finkelstein. 2014. The Internationalization Of The Academy: Findings, Open Questions, And Implications." In F. Huang, M. Finkelstein, and M.

- Rostan (Eds.) *The internationalization of the academy: Changes, realities and prospects*,. (pp. 258-280) Heidelberg: Springer.
- Saint-Blancat, C. (2017). "Making Sense of Scientific Mobility: How Italian Scientists Look Back on Their Trajectories of Mobility in the EU." Higher Education Policy. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-017-0042-z>
- Sidhu, R., K. C. Ho, and B. S. A. Yeoh. 2011. Emerging Education Hubs: The Case of Singapore. *Higher Education* 61, 23-40.
- Sidhu, R., B. S. A. Yeoh, and S. Chang. 2015. A Situated Analysis Of Global Knowledge Networks: Capital Accumulation Strategies Of Transnationally Mobile Scientists in Singapore. *Higher Education* 69 (1), 79-101.
- Stack, M. L. 2013. The Times Higher Education Ranking Product: Visualising Excellence Through Media, *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 11(4), 560-582.
- Tremblay, K. 2005. Academic Mobility and Immigration. *Journal of Studies in International Education* 9(3), 196-228.
- Yeoh, B. S. A. & Lai, A. E. (2008). Introduction: talent migration in and out of Asia: Challenges for policies and places." *Asian Population Studies* 4(3), 235-245

Table 1. Interview Participants’ Country of Origin

Country of Origin	
China	13
India	10
Philippines	4
Malaysia	4
Australia	4
Thailand	3
Taiwan	4
Japan	3
Indonesia	1
Korea	1
Total:	47

Table 2. Interview Participants' Academic Discipline

Discipline	
STEM	19
Social Science	17
Humanities	6
Professional*	5
Total:	47

*Professional category includes faculty teaching in Business, Education, Law, and Media Studies